

Haiti: Contesting the UN Occupation

By Deepa Panchang

WAS IT NAIVE TO THINK IT COULDN'T get worse? First, the January 12 earthquake in Haiti—the worst disaster in modern history—was met with an infuriatingly futile humanitarian response.¹ In October came a wrenching cholera outbreak, swiftly compounded by the deluge and destruction of Hurricane Tomas. As of this writing, cholera has infected more than 7,000 Haitians and killed at least 500. The source of the outbreak may itself be an insult: The Associated Press recently reported that sewage from a United Nations base at Mirebalais, a town north of Port-au-Prince, may have caused the outbreak.² The U.S. Centers for Disease Control later identified the cholera strain as likely from South Asia, leading to speculation that UN troops from Nepal, where the disease is endemic, brought it with them.³

If true, the UN's malfeasance will become only the latest in a string of accusations that Haitians consistently level at MINUSTAH—the UN occupation force known by its French acronym, established in 2004 after Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a U.S.-supported coup. The UN said it would investigate whether its sewage triggered the cholera outbreak, but MINUSTAH's record of abuse and deception makes this a dubious prospect. Investigative reports published as early as 2005 by Harvard and the University of Miami not only found that the force was making "little, if any, progress" toward its stated goals of promoting stabilization through disarmament, supporting the political process, and monitoring human rights, but also validated "credible allegations of human rights abuses perpetrated by MINUSTAH itself."⁴ These include cover-ups of rights violations by the Haitian National Police, as well as direct violence against civilians in the poorer neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, playing into U.S. po-

litical interests in undermining strongholds of support for Aristide.

MINUSTAH's deceits are no minor affair. While many countries' post-earthquake aid pledges remain unfulfilled—including \$1.15 billion from the United States—UN member nations spent \$5 billion on MINUSTAH between 2004 and 2009. Although it often undermines the UN's own proclaimed ideals, MINUSTAH is a funding priority for a reason: It is a political

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tool, one that keeps a lid on social and political movements in Haiti, while U.S. export and manufacturing interests move in as a part of the "reconstruction" plan, setting up new sweatshops and safeguarding the dumping of U.S. agricultural produce.

Given that MINUSTAH's mandate was renewed October 14, the moment is particularly ripe to examine the true nature of its activities. To begin with, the devastating January earthquake prompted no

improvement in MINUSTAH's lackadaisical approach to the human rights wording in its mandate. In fact, the force's role in the immediate crisis response reportedly hindered aid efforts, given its overemphasis on military security.⁵ Yet in the following months, it became clear that MINUSTAH did not think it worth its time to protect the thousands of displaced people living in tent camps from the scourge of rape and assault. Even today, UN troops are repeatedly called out to preside over peaceful political demonstrations, but rarely do they respond to pleas to protect the vulnerable.

One all too common case illustrates the point. In June, a desperately underserved camp in Cité Soleil, the poorest area of Port-au-Prince, came under violent attack from thugs hired, according to community members, by a local music business that wanted them off the land to hold concerts. Camp residents and ad-

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vocacy groups spent months making pleas to multiple levels of authority for protection, but MINUSTAH offered no effective response. When UN police did make an appearance for a tarp distribution two months later, their ineffectiveness at keeping the peace became obvious. Halfway through the distribution, the very aggressors who had been threatening the camp for the past several weeks disrupted the process, while the UN police hung back and watched.

Given that the officers present were from five different countries and spoke nearly no languages in common, it was no wonder that they could coordinate neither with each other nor with camp residents. As the situation calmed and frustrated residents dispersed, a bright-eyed officer asked me, “Do you know if there will be any more distributions soon we could go watch?” Two others wanted to take a photograph with me. These officers, often young and disoriented, are made to stand by as symbols of “protection” in the best-case scenario, and to rashly perpetuate violence in the worst.

When MINUSTAH’s mandate was renewed in October, with more verbiage about protecting civilians and democratic processes, peaceful protesters gathered by the UN logistics base to express their opposition to the force’s continued presence in Haiti.⁶ They were confronted with armed “peacekeepers,” threatened at gunpoint, and made to halt the protest. Shots were fired, and a UN vehicle drove into the crowd and pushed several protesters and an international journalist into a ditch.⁷

In fact, for the past several months, camp residents have been organizing peaceful protests—on the 12th of every month—to demand dignity in aid, the provision of basic needs, and a voice in the recovery process. Educating themselves about their

constitutional privileges and UN human rights treaties, communities are organizing to demand their rights from the well-funded UN agencies and NGOs that seem disconnected from their plight. Perhaps it’s time UN officials themselves took another look at these treaties, which guarantee basic needs and community participation, instead of touting the NGO line that conditions have improved and the relief stage is over—an insult to the daily struggle of Haiti’s some 1.5 million displaced people. The cholera outbreak and the recent hurricane should be a walk-up call to this reality.

MAJOR NEWS OUT-lets did not cover the monthly demonstrations and pleas to the international community for accountability, transparency, and participation. But when protests on October 26 disrupted the establishment of a cholera treatment center in Saint-Marc, the coastal town where the outbreak was discovered, the press covered the event widely. Argentine MINUSTAH troops with riot shields arrived to reinforce the police, firing warning shots and dispersing the protesters. None of the coverage bothered to ask if the community was involved in planning for the cholera center, or if they had understandable reasons for protesting (such as fear of contagion). Instead, the media buzz around the protest and the militarized reaction to it portrayed the community as irrational or ignorant of its self-interest—rather than suggesting how local participation is vital even in crisis settings.

Far from ignorant, grassroots Haitian groups have long been con-

demning the decisions that cause vulnerability to diseases like cholera, and they have been supported in this by international organizations like Partners in Health (PIH).

In the United States, where about half of households donated to the earthquake, we must critically probe the UN occupation of Haiti and the continuing denial of basic rights to Haitians—that is, if we believe solidarity means more than writing a check.

A 2008 report co-authored by PIH, for example, described the Inter-American Development Bank’s 2001 decision to withhold loans for water projects under pressure from the U.S. government.⁸ Haiti’s water infrastructure thus fell prey to U.S. efforts to destabilize Aristide’s government, which PIH’s Dr.

Evan Lyon cited October 26 as a direct cause of the poor sanitary conditions that allowed cholera to take hold.⁹ The UN peacekeeping force, being a huge diversion of resources and a wrench in the democratic process, only served to aggravate this destabilization.

In the United States, where about half of households donated to the earthquake relief, we must critically probe the UN occupation of Haiti and the continuing denial of basic rights to Haitians—that is, if we believe solidarity means more than writing a check. We must demand an independent investigation into the UN base at Mirebalais and the origins of the cholera outbreak. We must stop our tax dollars from fueling militarization masked as aid and call for a full disbursement of humanitarian funds. If we don’t speak out, we will fail to heed the Haitian voices that have so much to say about their own development, their vision for the future, and the “peacekeeping” they do not need. **□**

NOTES

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